

By David Streitfeld

Conspiring to Publish

JUST WHEN you thought it was safe to go back to the grassy knoll, there's a new round of Who-Killed-JFK? books coming this fall. The hook this time is the 30th anniversary of the assassination.

New evidence is promised, as well as definitive answers. Of course, that's what publishers promise every time they issue new JFK books. If there truly were a definitive answer, if incontrovertible, inarguable proof of conspiracy or lack thereof were found, the market for these books would dry up.

The two titles that are likely to command the most attention take opposite points of view. Gerald L. Posner's *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* is being kept under wraps by Random House, but it reportedly uses dozens of new interviews and computer enhancements of the Zapruder film of the shooting to come up with the shocking conclusion that the Warren Report was right: Oswald acted alone.

Robert J. Groden, staff photographic consultant to the House Committee on Assassinations, was also a consultant to Oliver Stone's "JFK." If that doesn't give you a clue to his opinion, the subtitle of his book will make it clear: *The Killing of a President: The Complete Photographic Record of the John F. Kennedy Assassination, the Conspiracy and the Cover-up.*

Look for Posner and Groden to duke it out on talk shows. If you want a whole panel, you can invite Harrison Edward Livingstone, author of *Killing the Truth: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case* (Carroll and Graf). This one's about previous writers on the assassination, many of whom may have had their own agendas and disinformation plans.

Having a hard time keeping all the theories straight? Maybe you need *Who Shot JFK? A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories*, by Bob Callahan (Fireside). A former speechwriter for Robert Kennedy, Callahan began like most people: He had no idea what the truth was. Then he went to see the Stone film, and his eyes got opened a bit.

"Emotionally, I thought Stone was right," Callahan says. Intellectually, he now does too: "I finally realized the evidence in Dealey Plaza suggests a crossfire. Once you have that, you have a conspiracy." Still, in the book "we're just trying to give you the range of opinions. We're not trying to convert anyone."

Want just the facts, so you can assemble your own theories? Pick up *Who's Who in the JFK Assassination: An A to Z Encyclopedia*, by Michael Benson. It covers 1,400



President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy with Texas Gov. John B. Connally on Nov. 22, 1963

suspects, victims, witnesses, law enforcement officials and investigators. This one's coming from Carol Publishing, whose chief, Steve Schragis, says, "If we didn't have at least one JFK book, I don't think we'd be worthy of calling ourselves trade publishers."

What if you have two? "It might mean you're not quite as serious," Schragis says with a laugh. Nevertheless, Carol acquired two weeks ago *Passport to Assassination: The Never-Before-Told Story of Lee Harvey Oswald by the KGB Colonel Who Knew Him*. "There is a huge market for these books," says Schragis. "That's been proven as recently as a few months ago."

At this point, let me briefly diverge from the assassination to point out there are a few other hot areas in publishing: The Chuck-and-Diana scandal tales, as well as autobiographies by '60s and '70s television stars. This last group really came alive with

the success of *Growing Up Brady*, to the point where there are three books coming out within the next six months by "Gilligan's Island" stars: There's Gilligan's autobiography, the Professor's story, and a cookbook from Mary Ann.

At this point, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that combining at least two of these trends would give a book a real shot at bestsellerdom. Coming in November from Forge is *Columbo: The Grassy Knoll*, by William Harrington, complete with photo of actor Peter Falk on the dustjacket. As the blurb from syndicated columnist Jack Anderson has it: "Our greatest detective tackles our greatest unsolved crime." Of course, the greatest detective was fictional while the crime was all too real, but this sort of blending indicates just how much of a hall of mirrors the assassination has become.

Conventional Wisdom

A FEW LAST notes from the book-sellers' convention in Miami Beach during the Memorial Day weekend:

- A nonfiction book by Alice Walker, *Warrior Marks*, is being rushed to print in September as a companion to a TV film directed by Pratibha Parmar. A follow-up to Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, it also concerns female genital mutilation.

In a statement, Walker said: "My subtitle includes the phrase 'sexual blinding.' I was shot in the eye by my brother years ago, and I am blind in one eye. Being visually mutilated helped me to understand that sexual mutilation is similar. If the woman is mutilated—if her clitoris is removed—she will be unable to erotically see herself; she will be sexually blinded.

"That is why women who have been circumcised accept any husband, no matter how unacceptable to them, and why they seem so lacking in spirit. I am deliberately speaking of my own injury as a patriarchal wound: to say that I do not set myself apart from these women, that I am not immune to their pain or suffering."

- George Bush is said to be on the verge of selling his memoirs. One popular rumor: Since he's already covered most of his life in a traditional autobiography published some years ago, this book would exclusively focus on his presidency, and only one aspect at that: foreign policy. One rumor had him writing it with former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft.

- Further evidence of a poetry boom: Penguin announced a new series called The Penguin Poets, intended to "put poetry back in readers' daily lives." The first four books are from Robert Hunter, lyricist for the Grateful Dead; perennial avant-garde

hero Jim Carroll; Amy Gerstler, who won a National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection *Bitter Angel*; and Irish poet Derek Mahon.

Meanwhile, Knopf's Everyman Library is launching a new series of classic poets—Baudelaire, Dickinson, Shelley, Rossetti—in what promises to be attractive small hard-cover editions. And Vintage has hurriedly scheduled a "collected poems" by new poet laureate Rita Dove. Finally: Washington's Chapters Bookstore received an award at the convention for being one of 11 bookstores that have done the most for verse.

Signing Off

RICHARD POWERS, the highly praised young author of four novels, was recently scheduled to appear at Chapters to read from his latest, *Operation Wandering Soul* (reviewed on page 2). This created a stir, since Powers has rarely been interviewed, has never done a reading and never—this is the key part—done a book signing. Rare book dealers from all over ordered multiple copies.

It didn't happen. "My publicist had begun to make these arrangements when I was out of the country, and didn't anticipate my getting cold feet at the altar. I guess I don't do publicity very well," says Powers, a long-time resident of Holland currently living in Illinois.

His problem with signing books is a philosophical one: "An individual copy of a book is more or less valuable to the degree a reader has engaged himself with it, and not to the degree an author has made it more valuable by signing it."

Yet as Powers fully appreciates, the only reason a signed copy of one of his books would be valuable is because there aren't any. "It's a no-win situation. If you attempt too rigorously to avoid a fetish, it becomes a fetish of its own. I just have to do what preserves my equanimity the most, what makes it easier to write the next blank page."

Talking Heads

ASIDE FROM the Paris Review Q&A's—which have the appearance of spoken conversations but are often extensively reworked by the participants, making some answers almost bite-sized essays—it's hard to think of a major source of author interviews prior to, say, 1980. Authors weren't so voluble once; if they were, their complaints, observations and mutterings weren't recorded in as systematic a fashion.

Things have changed. Partly this is due to publishers' successful attempts to market the personalities of authors. The rise of the



personal computer has helped as well; combined with a portable tape-recorder, it makes an author interview practically effortless to do and write. It helps that many writers are so good with words it doesn't take much to get eloquence out of them.

By this time, interviewing has become such an industry that it's possible to produce such specialized books as *Conversations in Exile: Russian Writers Abroad* (Duke University Press). Edited by University of Maryland professor John Glad, this material is unfortunately largely out of date—the interview with Joseph Brodsky, for instance, was done in 1979, while the one with Vassily Aksyonov was conducted in 1982-83 (although this at least is briefly updated). But where else are you going to find even dated material on such writers as Boris Khazanov, Yury Ivask and Igor Chinov?

A book of more general interest is *Writing for Your Life: Ninety-Two Contemporary Authors Talk About the Art of Writing and the Job of Publishing* (Pushcart). Edited by Sybil Steinberg, this is a compilation of brief pieces from Publishers Weekly focusing mostly on such serious literary folk as Barbara Kingsolver, Jane Smiley, William Boyd, Paul Auster, Nadine Gordimer and Grace Paley.

There's an absence of flash and mannerism in these articles, which is all to the good: The PW interviewers are content to let their subjects get all the attention. The only criticism is not so much that the pieces are outdated, but that they're not dated at all. You're forced to figure out when they were done from internal evidence, which

limits their value. Still, you can't complain about any book that offers a chat with K.C. Constantine, a mystery novelist almost as elusive as Richard Powers.

The Paris Review, meanwhile, is still going strong, continuing to produce the interviews that have made its reputation. In the spring issue is one of the best ever, with Mark Helprin, author of *Winter's Tale* and *A Soldier of the Great War*. Helprin says—or at least believes—that he has alienated so many people he has become famous for it.

"No creature hath the fury of a writer who extends himself and does not receive payment in kind," he says, adding that one unnamed, now dead, author became furious at Helprin's supposed assertion he did not read living writers. Not true, says Helprin: "[We] had spent many interminable, boring hours while he was, technically, alive, discussing his many, interminable, boring books." Does this give a clue why Helprin has so few friends in the business?

Most authors tend toward the sloppy, but Helprin proves beyond a doubt he is more controlled: "When I was very young, I used to clean up after my parents. If I stay in a hotel, I make the bed and clean the room when I get up, even the bathroom mirror, for which I carry a tiny bottle of ammonia."

He goes on: "When I used to go on a long run on Sunday morning when I lived on the Upper West Side, I would pass thousands and thousands of people in restaurants eating . . . (I won't say this word, because I hate it so much, but it rhymes with *hunch*, and it's a disgusting meal that is supposed to be both breakfast and lunch). There they were—having slept for five hours while I was doing calisthenics and running—unshaven (the women, too), bleary-eyed, surrounded by newspapers scattered as if in a hamster cage, smoking noxious French cigarettes and drinking Bloody Marys while they ate huge quantities of fat. They looked to me like a movie version of South American bandits."